

The following article, written by Bradley Hope and Omar Karmi, appeared in The National on September 17, 2012 at www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/anti-islam-video-casts-spotlight-on-coptic-christian-groups

CAIRO/WASHINGTON // The 13-minute video clip that defamed the Prophet Mohammed and set off violent protests across the Muslim world has put the spotlight on Coptic Christian advocacy groups in the US and renewed fears of growing religious divisions in Egypt.

US-based Coptic groups are vocal critics of the new Islamist governments of North Africa, especially in Egypt, where 10 per cent of the population are Copts, but they have been at pains to distance themselves from those involved with the films.

The filmmaker who identified himself as Sam Bacile, but is now believed to be 55-year-old Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, told US news organisations that his goal was to show that "Islam is a cancer". Mr Nakoula is said to be an Egyptian-American Copt who had been convicted of bank fraud. Another outspoken Copt in the US, Morris Sadek, promoted the film clip in an email to Arab media and through social media in the days before the anniversary of the September 11th, 2001, attacks on the United States.

Magdi Khalil, the president of the Washington, DC-based Coptic Solidarity, said his group was "completely against what happened", describing the clip as a "cheap, vulgar movie against Christians as well as Muslims".

"We respect all religions. We respect our sisters and brothers in Egypt and around the world," he said. "Our community here in the US and in Egypt and also the churches are against this so-called movie."

But he also blamed Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood for stoking up protests against the film that snowballed into an attack on the US consulate in Benghazi that killed the ambassador and three other Americans.

"The Muslim Brotherhood were behind those attacks," Mr Khalil said.

The Brotherhood had called for large protests across Egypt on Friday, but cancelled in the morning because of security concerns. Officials from the group have condemned the attacks on embassies, but also maintained that Muslims across the world have the right to demonstrate peacefully against the insult to Islam.

Egypt's Coptic Christians have long complained of persecution in the country's predominantly Islamic society. Since the time of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's president from 1956 to 1970, they have faced greater restrictions than their Muslim counterparts with building or repairing their places of worship. There have been numerous clashes between Muslims and Christians, often sparked by a small dispute or rumour in a community where the two groups live side-by-side.

One such incident came in August, when the entire Coptic community of about 100 families in the village of Giza temporarily fled their homes after a minor disagreement between a Coptic launderer and a Muslim client led to deadly fights and looting. They were only able to return after the police and military restored security several days later.

After the uprising that toppled the regime of Hosni Mubarak last year and the rise of followers of political Islam into public office, tensions between Christians and Muslims have risen.

Last year the
US Commission on International Religious Freedoms
- part of the federal government - recommended for the first time that Egypt be placed on a list of countries where religious freedom violations were the most severe.

Dwight Bashir, the deputy director of policy and research, said in an interview that the decision came after analysing trends of attacks after the fall of the Mubarak regime.

"What we saw after having looked at the situation was that Copts were going to be more vulnerable at least in the short term," he said.

Several foreign governments have seen a rise in asylum requests from Egyptians. They don't provide a break-down of asylum requesters by religion, but Mr Bashir said the spike in US asylum requests came after his organization designated Egypt as one of the countries with severe restrictions on freedom of religion.

The number of people from Egypt who were granted asylum by the US nearly doubled to 1,028 people in 2011, compared with 531 people in 2010, according to the Department of Homeland Security. Egypt was the fourth-largest source of asylees, after China, Venezuela and Ethiopia. The data did not break down the people granted asylum by religion. The German embassy in Cairo has also seen an uptick in asylum requests in recent months, according to Simone Stemmler, the first secretary of the embassy.

The fear among some Coptic groups in the US is that their peaceful lobbying of the US government to take a harder line with Egypt on religious discrimination will be drowned out by the uproar over the video clip.

"The concern is it makes it harder to have reasonable dialogue between reasonable people," said Ihab Marcus, the director of communications at the St Mark Coptic Orthodox Church in Fairfax, Virginia.

"What I think the vast majority of Coptic people and Muslims want is normal dialogue, they want mutual respect, they want mutual love. Whenever you have a few people coming out of any group that do something independent, it makes it harder for the majority of that group to have reasonable conversation."

Bishop Serapion of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Los Angeles, Southern California and Hawaii said in a statement last week that the filmmakers should be blamed, rather than tarnishing the image of the entire Coptic diaspora.

"Holistically blaming the Copts for the production of this movie is equivalent to holistically blaming Muslims for the actions of a few fanatics," he said. "Even though Christians often face persecution, injustice and calls for open attacks over the airwaves, we

reject violence in all its forms."

The statements of condemnation of the film clip from across the Christian world, including Coptic groups in the US and in Egypt, has prevented greater divisiveness so far, said Emad Shahin, a professor at the American University in Cairo who studies the intersection of Islam and politics.

"This is the positive sign," he said. "Even during the protests in Tahrir Square, there were some Coptic people providing masks to the protesters ... That doesn't mean that the relationship between the two communities here in Egypt is extremely amicable or peaceful. There are issues but I think there will not be major ramifications of this video because the Coptic people came out strongly against the insult to Islam."

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